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31 January 1968

MEMORANDUM FOR: The Honorable Walt W. Rostow
Special Assistant to the President

SUBJECT : 31 January Telephone Conversation with Saigon Station

1. At 31/0433Z I was in telephonic communication with our Saigon Station. The circuit was bad: I could hear Saigon but they could not understand me. The Station reported that the situation was generally stabilizing and the press greatly exaggerating the seriousness of the penetration of the Embassy. The Chancery was not actually penetrated, though Viet Cong did get into the compound. There were no U.S. civilian casualties in Saigon known as of that time.

2. After the phone conversation I transmitted the following specific questions to Mr. Lapham through the open teletype link, explaining that these were the points I had hoped to raise over the phone.

- a. What does the countrywide situation look like?
- b. What do regional officers report?
- c. Was attempt made against Thieu, Ky or other senior GVN officials?
- d. Did Saigon attack seem primarily aimed at American targets?
- e. Was there any local intelligence or other warning of these attacks (in Saigon or elsewhere)?
- f. What do you expect in Saigon and countrywide within next 24-48 hours?
- g. Any indication of effect attacks had on mood or attitudes of Vietnamese population?

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h. Your general preliminary comments on meaning and import current countrywide spate of VC activity.

i. How is VC surge likely to affect GVN standing and stability?

3. At 31/0710Z, Mr. Lapham replied. The text of his reply is given below. I am passing it to the recipients of this memorandum in the belief that you may find it useful. You will understand, of course, that these are Mr. Lapham's initial reactions in a very fluid situation, the full dimensions and details of which were not known to him at that time.

FOR MR. CARVER FROM MR. LAPHAM:

1. Appreciate your need for rapid coverage of events and assure you we are doing everything possible to comply. It has been extremely difficult during the morning hours to obtain any hard information on the events of the night since police are fully occupied in mopping up operations in various sectors of the city. For example, the VC continued to be holed up in a house across from the Palace and apparently in houses in the area of Tan Son Nhut. Contrary to earlier reports, Embassy employees have been instructed not to report to work this afternoon.

2. You will shortly receive dissem concerning police report we have received re enemy plans for this evening.

3. Mr. Carver's telecon just received. As you can see from above, announcement premature that situation was calm enough to permit return of personnel to work. At this moment, it is impossible to estimate how long it will take to mop up VC who are holed up around town. If intelligence referred to above is accurate, we may have a busy night again this evening.

4. Will be filing report shortly on countrywide situation (TDCS 314/01647-68). Regional officers are preparing sitreps for direct transmission. An FVS has been filed re Loan's comments. President Thieu was in My Tho yesterday and requested MACV assistance in returning to Saigon this morning. Although American facilities received their share of attention, other targets were Korean and Philippine Embassies, Palace and Saigon radio station. During the last few days, Station has diligently pursued all available sources for intelligence that might have given us warning of these attacks. The police had a few spotty

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reports but nothing which appeared to be very hard. They were unquestionably not prepared for this attack on the opening day of Tet, when large numbers of them were celebrating with their families. At this point, we anticipate that country-wide attacks will continue tonight. However, we lack intelligence from the regions which would give us an accurate read-out. Your telecon questions, para 2g, h, and i will be dealt with separately.

5. COS and EXO will spend night in Station, with a backup commo command post in another area of the city. We are establishing additional commo links with various police posts. Every possible precaution being taken to assure security of personnel and classified facilities.

6. Re your telecon questions g, h and i:

a. You will appreciate the difficulty we have in even beginning an answer to these questions which will be of great importance when the security situation settles down.

b. We are not today in contact with many elements in the Vietnamese population to discern their attitudes and moods. A circling airplane with loudspeakers told the people to stay off the streets and in their homes. VC have reportedly made specific threats to persons living in certain areas to vacate homes at risk of death. Most Saigonese have indeed stayed at home and we assume that they will follow VC orders as well. The mood is very tense.

c. The meaning and import of current activity can be extracted from VC stated intentions regarding the winter-spring campaign, their calls for general uprising, and their obvious drive toward a major victory for propaganda and morale purposes. While we may be undergoing a major multiple harassment without lasting military significance, the ultimate import will depend on their degree of success on the ground and the impact on American and South Vietnamese willingness to rebound. The boost to VC/NVA morale is in any case certain to be substantial.

d. Regardless of what happens tonight or during the next few days, the degree of success already achieved in Saigon and around the country will adversely affect the image of the GVN (and its powerful American allies as well) in the eyes of the people. All Vietnamese, both those who are sympathetic and those who are

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critical, hope and expect for protection from their government and the relative lack of VC activity in Saigon during recent months created a presumption of GVN and police strength in this area at any rate. Those who believe that security situation (not the political) is paramount will deduce that only a tough, efficient, no-nonsense government run by the military can meet the sheer physical thrust of the Viet Cong. Those who cannot stomach such a government will be moved further toward the temptation of negotiations and coalition government.

e. We would hope to be permitted to delay additional analysis and prediction until we have provided for the necessary security of our installations and personnel and can begin to move about the city to communicate with sources able to provide authoritative reactions and ideas. In meantime, hope above will be helpful.

George A. Carver, Jr.
Special Assistant for Vietnamese Affairs

cc: Secretary Rusk
Secretary McNamara
General Wheeler

O/DCI/SAVA/GACarver:mee

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